

First year English at UTAS

Dr Lisa Fletcher and Dr Robert Clarke



Dr Lisa Fletcher, University Lecturer and Co-ordinator of the UTAS English first-year program (Hobart)



Dr Robert Clarke, University Lecturer and First Year Co-ordinator English Studies (Launceston)

In February 2012, 335 students enrolled in first-year English at UTAS, including 65 distance students. What were they getting themselves into and what did they hope to achieve?

This year the UTAS English team surveyed first-year students about their prior experiences of studying English and their motivations for enrolling in our discipline at university. The results were in part surprising, in part expected, and they have helped us to re-shape our programme to enhance the first-year student experience.

Who are our students?

To date, 223 students have responded to the survey. Unexpectedly, only 58% of this year's respondents were aged 18–20 years. In 2012 English at UTAS attracted a strong cohort of mature-age students with 24% aged 26 and over. Most of our students are women, with a 2:1 ratio of females to males. Nearly all of our students are Australian born.

A significant majority of our students are Tasmanian, with 74% having completed their secondary school education in Tasmania. Of these students, 72% have studied at least one pre-tertiary English course. The most popular course for enrolling UTAS students was English Writing (43.5%), followed by English Studies (38%) and English Communications (27%).

Thirty-nine per cent have completed two pre-tertiary courses; the most popular combination is English Studies and English Writing.

The survey asks students to select one or more statements which best describe why they chose to enrol in first-year English (Table 1). In broad terms our students chose English because they: love reading; enjoyed studying English at secondary school and did well; and see English as a pathway to their future career. About a third of our students have an ambition to be a primary or secondary school teacher, and a similar proportion want to be writers.

I enjoy reading, so English is an obvious choice for me	49%
I enjoyed English at secondary school.	46%
I was successful at English at secondary school	41%
English will give me skills that will be important for my future career.	38%
I would like to read more widely and English will introduce me to new writers or new types of literature.	38%
I think first-year English will improve my essay writing.	30%
I want to be a writer and first-year English is a prerequisite for 200- and 300-level creative writing units.	28%
I would like to be a secondary school English teacher.	14%
I would like to be a primary school teacher.	10%
I would like to be a secondary school teacher (other than an English teacher).	9%
English is not my first language and I would like to improve my communication skills in English.	2%

Table 1

Finally, we asked "What do you hope to learn as a university English student?" Most students enrol in English with clear goals and, importantly, they share a consistent set of expectations. The most common aspirations were: to improve skills in reading and writing; to broaden their knowledge of literature and the world; to develop critical thinking and analytical skills; and to enhance their career prospects. And, as we hoped to see, many students selected English for the sheer pleasure of reading literature. We were fascinated that hardly any students identified the genres, writers, or topics that they would like to study, but focused instead on the generic skills they hoped to gain and their plans for the future.

The first-year English program

From 2013, students enrolling at UTAS who want to major in English will begin by enrolling in our two core first-year units: HEA103 English 1A (Semester 1) and HEA104 English 1B (Semester 2). English 1A addresses the question "How do short stories, poems, plays, novels and films generate meaning?" English 1B asks "Why are certain texts regarded as classics within the English literary canon and how do we encounter them today?" Across the course of the year students encounter a range of canonical and popular texts. From Shakespeare, Coleridge and Austen, to the film art of Alfred Hitchcock and the popular television series *Dexter*, and from the plays of Tom Stoppard to the novels of Kazuo Ishiguro, our students will study texts from a wide range of styles, genres, and periods. In first semester, students focus on learning the skills of close reading and enhancing their ability to communicate their ideas about texts. In semester 2, we introduce students to the skills of tertiary-level research and analysis in English literary studies.

In addition to these core units, from 2013 aspiring writers can also choose to study an

elective unit in creative writing, HEA107 Writing Short Fiction. This unit guides students through the steps involved in producing polished works of short fiction.

First-year English is the gateway for students who wish to major in English and pursue careers in fields as diverse as education, government, literature, the media, and the arts. English is also a great entry point to the broad field of the humanities and a way for students to explore fundamental questions about themselves and their place in the world. As one of our students wrote in response to our survey question, "What do you hope to learn as a university English student?":

*Heaps.
Critical analytical thinking ...
Great storytelling.
Literary culture!
The joy of reading and sharing.
Insights into nuances and forms of expression that are interdisciplinary.
And lots more that I don't know about yet!*

Dr Lisa Fletcher is a lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania and the coordinator of the UTAS English first-year program. She is the author of three books, including the first major study of heterosexual love in the historical novel. Her writing about literature has also been published in a range of international academic journals and edited collections. Lisa is a member of the judging panel for the 2013 Tasmanian Literary Prizes.

Dr Robert Clarke is a lecturer in English studies in the School of English, Journalism, and European Languages at the University of Tasmania. He co-ordinates the first-year English program and teaches Australian and modernist literatures. His research focuses on contemporary Australian fiction and travel writing. He is editor of *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Cambridge Scholars, 2009) and "Travel and Celebrity Culture" (special issue *Postcolonial Studies*, 12.2, 2009). His articles and reviews have been published in a range international peer-reviewed journals.

From 2012 TATE is sponsoring a prize for a first-year English student at UTAS titled the 'Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English - Excellence in English Learning Prize.' The winning recipient's name will be published in the February 2013 issue of *EduTATE*.